

How to Help Feed Your Birds

Our acknowledgements to RSPB for the information used

Throughout the year you can help birds by regular feeding and providing water. They will reward you with their exciting antics and spectacle of colours. An intimacy of expectation soon develops.

Bird tables that cats can't access are a very good way of feeding. If located near cover (shrubs and trees), small birds feel more secure. Hanging feeders are popular because the birds contort in many different positions as they indulge. Feeders need to be robust (preferably squirrel proof), fixed securely well above the ground and located near cover. Never fill too full to avoid moulds developing. There are different types of feeder for small seeds and for nut/large seeds. (Ensure that the mesh holes on nut feeders are adequate size to avoid trapping beaks and feet.) Many birds are ground feeders and a drained ground tray is ideal to keep the food clean. Locate it well away from any cover that may be used by cats. Tree bark, cracked logs and gaps in walls may be stuffed with fatty food mixes. Birds like these natural feed stations. Coconut shells, shallow plastic food cartons (carefully cleaned if they contained dairy products) and ceramic bells are good suspended feeders to use with home prepared mixes.

During the winter period it is particularly important to help birds by supplementing their diet. They will continue to hunt for food in your garden but there is less available during this time of year. **Never feed them mouldy food**, it will harm them. Only put out what will be consumed in a day. Remove old food as this becomes infected with salmonella bacteria which will kill the birds. Peanuts frequently contain high levels of a natural toxin that kills birds. Nuts should be purchased from specialist, reputable dealers. Hygiene is essential. Dispose of food contaminated by bird droppings; keep food away from dirty paving and out of puddles; clean and sterilise (5% strength) feeders and tables; avoid rodent problems.

Bread scraps should always be reduced to crumb size to avoid swelling bird stomachs and choking them. When feeding bread to waterfowl, always throw it into the water. **Never feed bread when young ducks and geese are around** as this badly affects their development, rendering them too weak to survive.

Preferred supplementary foods are:

Prepared bird seed mixtures. A good mix of seeds will attract a wide range of birds. In the winter, mixes containing whole peanuts are suitable. However, never feed whole peanuts in spring and summer.

Sunflower seeds. Stripped seeds are the best as they have higher oil content. Sunflower hearts are popular with siskin and chaffinch.

Nyjer seed is very good high oil content food.

Peanuts. In the winter these are very popular with a wide range of birds. Feed whole nuts and for smaller birds, crushed nuts.

Fat Balls. A good high energy food. The nylon bags can cause damage to bird feet and the tongues of woodpeckers. Remove from bag and place at height.

Bird Cake. Make bird cake by pouring melted fat (suet or lard) into a mixture of ingredients such as seeds, nuts, dried fruit, oatmeal, cheese and cake. One third fat to two thirds ingredients. Stir well and pour to set in a variety of containers for hanging, or turn it out onto a bird table.

Mealworms. Dried or live are firm favourites of robins.

Meaty dog and cat food. A good winter feed but may attract cats, rodents and large birds such as magpies and gulls.

Coconut. Fresh it is popular with wrens and robins. Remove if mildew begins to develop. Don't use desiccated coconut.

Rice and Cereals. Preferably cooked rice as it will attract more species. Uncooked porridge oats, but never cooked. Small quantities of breakfast cereal (without sugar or salt coatings) with water available nearby.

Fruit. Dried or fresh cranberry, grapes, currants and tree/shrub berries, sliced carrot and apple and pieces of banana will attract fruit eaters. Food can be loose or strung and hung above a branch of a tree.

A 'Fun-with-Learning' program document.

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